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The Dance of Death



IN PAINTING
AND
IN PRINT

BY T. TINDALL WILDRIIDGE

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THE DANCE OF DEATH.

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GEORGE REDWAY.



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THE COUNT

Death, as a peasant, here heaps abuse upon the feudal lord, hurling at him his crest and shield, the "dear objects of his pride." The Count treads underfoot a flail, to denote, it is said, his inhumanity to his labouring vassals.

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THE

Dance of Death

IN PAINTING AND IN PRINT

BY

T. TINDALL WILDRIDGE

“——What's yet in this
That bears the name of Life? Yet in this life
Lie hid more thousand Deaths: yet Death we fear
That makes these odds all even.”—

SHAKESPEARE.

WITH WOODCUTS.

GEORGE REDWAY,
YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN, LONDON.

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THE DANCE OF DEATH

IN PAINTING AND IN PRINT.



WERE the hopes and aspirations of nations after immortality to be judged by the light in which they have depicted by art their impressions of that mysterious disunion of body and spirit, called Death, then might the consolatory element in the Gothic mind be deemed

slight indeed. This rending asunder of the twin components of humanity, like everything else which comes within the ken of that humanity, is personified. Death, like the Devil, is considered one real person. It has always been so. But while the ancients shewed Death as brother to Sleep—a veiled figure, dim, unknown, mysterious—we, of the Gothic type, rush rudely into the charnel-house, and dragging forth the earthy scaffold of our earthly frame, endow it with a Satanically malicious spirit all of our own conception, and cry Behold ! This is Death !

What power, too, has not the phantom's malignancy had given him by painters and poets : says Drexelius,

" Tho' Death with drowsie Eyes does wink
at Health,
And lets you live a little while
by stealth ;
Yet he'll awake, and vext at past
delay,
Snatch you with sad surprising
haste away."

The same writer indeed says that Death is sudden, but beautiful ; yet only, it seems, when he snatches us at our work. Everywhere we find Death considered a monster, that, like Assanus Sassa the Turk, takes our old clothes from us, however much we prefer them, compelling us to take in exchange new garments we would rather be without.

Doubtless this embodiment of Death in a repulsive, vengeful, hateful, personal form, was originally adopted to admonish those of wicked life, who could not look forward to the embraces of mother earth without feeling that for them dry bones had none but a terrible meaning. The universal recognition of the ghastly figuritivism, however, seems also to have some ground in the



THE POPE CROWNING AN EMPEROR.

A Cardinal and three Bishops assist; Death has here a two-fold presence.
The fleurs-de-lys upon the canopy are note-worthy.



THE EMPEROR.

The Emperor listens to the be-gowned advocate urging his case against the poor peasant, who supplicates for justice; Death, in the arrogance of his power, carelessly uses the monarch's crown as a rest, thus taking possession of his imperial victim.

vagueness of grasp held on the idea of Eternity by a monk-taught people.

Whatever the reason, we have very curious illustrations of the fact in the art of mediæval times. Isolated instances of the artistic use of the personified skeleton abound in manuscript and print, in missal and in prayer-book.

We have here, however, to confine ourselves to a brief glance at the one systematic use of the *Leti Memor*, the great instance of the class, that work of art—The Dance of Death. We have to look at this as a historical work of Art, yet not forgetting how it reflected the opinions and feelings of its day ; from each of the characters pourtrayed as being seized by the grim tyrant, we might expect the words of Posthumius :

"Quo vadām nescio, Invitus morior, Valete posthumi."	" Where I am going I know not : I die against my will ; Farewell, you survivors."
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The Dance of Death in its original artistic form is a sort of processional series, in which " all sorts and conditions of men " are shewn merrily conducted or seized by dancing skeletons, and the representation is met upon the walls of buildings and bridges, but chiefly in churches and churchyards.

The origin of the Dance has been conjectured to have been one of the religious Mysteries, Moralities, or dramatic exhibitions, which at the same time supplied a comedy and a homily. There certainly was an acted processional dance, in which the players one by one were snatched away ; Cervantes in *Don Quixote* mentions it as the " Cortes of Death." Also there is no lack of confirmation of the thing from the poets, of whom Piers Plowman (1350) affords the first allusion to the subject in literature :

" Death came drivyng after, and all to dust pashed,
 Kynges and kaysers, knightes and popes,

Learned and lewde, he ne let no man stande ;
That he hitte even, he never stood after."

This may refer to the Morality play, but that it is connected with the painted Dances (which may have followed a usual order in the processional figures) may be considered fairly certain, if only from a consideration, say, of the Dance at Lubeck, in which a King, a Kaiser and the rest, are shewn to head the long line, and have those names inscribed below each respectively. It is, perhaps, to be questioned whether the German verses,* known as the Machabre or Dance of Macaber, be not older than the allusion in the Vision of Piers Plowman. These verses, by whomever composed, were translated into various languages, our English version being by none less than John Lydgate, who, however, had them secondhand from some French verses accompanying, as was commonly the case, a Dance of Death, at St. Innocent's, Paris.

The earliest painting of the Dance of Death is said to be that at Basil, though it is probable that many of which we have information are as old. Doubtless nearly every church of importance in the fifteenth century, and many in the latter part of the fourteenth, had the Dance among their frescoes. The German and Swiss bridges, so often, too, the site of religious buildings, were decorated with the representation; an example is upon the Pont des Moulins leading into Lucerne, where is a fine Dance, restored within the last few years.

There are accounts of paintings of the Dance in numerous churches. That at Basil, by an artist unknown, is said have been painted in 1431, during a plague; it was at the Dominican

* It is odd to find these verses attributed to a *German poet of the name of Macaber!* though with the remark "of this person very little is known." Suggestions for the derivation of the word are "Macarius," an Egyptian Saint; "Magabir," Arabic for a churchyard; and the German "Macht-haber," a lord, (possessor of might). The French call the Dance *Chorea Machabaeorum, Chorea Macrorum*, or, "Danse de Maîtres"; the word may be read as a synonym for Death.



THE EMPRESS.

Death interrupts some courtly ceremonial to lead her Highness to the brink of an open grave, to show to what lowness she must now descend. The building which forms the background may possibly be capable of identification.



THE QUEEN.

Death seizes the youthful Queen at the Palace threshold, and, imitating the *antics* of a court buffoon, shews the hour-glass, intimating that her sand has run.

Convent, and twice restored or repainted, in 1566 and 1616; Holbein, who vulgarly has the credit of this, also painted upon a house at Basil a Dance, even whose "dead shadows" are spoken of by Bishop Burnet as being preferable to the coarse renewed work at the Convent.

At Klingenthal in the Little Basil was a Dance, thought to be of higher antiquity than that in the Dominican Churchyard.

Masonelle painted one at Dijon in 1436.

St. Mary's at Berlin (discovered 1860), Dresden, Annaberg, Minden, Amiens, Meissen, Vienna, Nuremberg, Chaise-Dieu in Auvergne (painted in 1424), Leipsic, Erfurt, Berne (destroyed 1660), St. Innocent's at Paris, have each left record of their possession of a painted Dance, while at Feschamps is a sculptured representation. There are some remains of a Dance at St. Maclou, Rouen. The finest examples extant are those in the cloisters surrounding the cemetery at Pisa, and in the roof of the ancient bridge at Berne.

At St. Mary's Church, Lubeck, is a fine Dance, considered to have been painted in 1463. This, more than almost any other of the Dances, is really such, the action of the skeletons being gleefully saltatory. The procession is headed by a prancing anatomy playing the flute; while following hand in hand is a long line of skeletons and human beings, inscribed below as Der Papst, Der Kaiser, Der Kaiserin, Der Cardinal, Der Konig, Der Bischof, Der Herzog, Der Abt, Der Ritter, Der Carthäuser, Der Bürgermeister, Der Domherr, Der Edelmann, and the rest, all in glum contrast to their merry conductors, who, from the piping Flotenblaser in front to the last of the crew, seem eager to hurry on their charges. The last is a skeleton with a scythe, who seems to hesitate as he prepares to mow down the mother by the cradle, under which is written, as a finale to the catalogue of victims, "Das Wiegenkinde."

This Dance is painted upon panels on the walls of a chapel on the north side of the Marienkirche.

Our own country is not wanting in instances. Old St. Paul's had its Dance of Death (in the cloister called *Pardon-church haugh* according to Pennant), which was demolished by the Protector Somerset, who carried off as "materials" the most splendid monuments to build his palace in the Strand. Salisbury Cathedral had its Dance, in a chapel. Hexham has or had some slight remains.

But the most noteworthy English painting was the life-size series by Holbein in the Palace of Whitehall, in fresco, painted for Henry VIII, and which was unfortunately burnt down in 1697.

With the advent of printing the Dance of Death extended its admonitory gambols among the people, though probably what was gained in popularity was lost in sanctity and salutary effect.

The first book at all worthy to be compared with the fresco paintings of the Dance, and which, indeed, as being the model for all subsequent attempts, may be considered the first book of designs on the subject, was that printed at Lyons in 1538, by Melchior and Gaspar Trechsel, with forty-one exquisite wood-cuts. Under different titles (the first was "*Simulachres et Historiees faces de la Mort*") and in various languages, it seems to have appeared in twelve editions up to the year 1573. This is the work which is often and erroneously styled "Holbein's Dance of Death." Two instances have been given, and others follow, where the Dance has been the subject of Holbein's pencil, so that, without examination, it has generally been found convenient to ascribe all good examples, and some indifferent, to that great painter, not only in execution but design. But that Holbein was not the designer of the "Simulachres" is evident, for the dedication of the edition of



THE BISHOP.

This worthy Bishop not unwillingly resigns himself to the hand-clasp of Death, who grinningly leads him away from his distracted flock; note the curious reflection of the setting sun.



THE ABBESS.

The Holy Mother is being dragged from her convent by means of her scapulary; both she and the young nun seem to look upon Death as a visitor never expected there.

1538 informs us that the artist of the work had died, leaving some of the designs unfinished. Holbein lived to 1554-5. There is, however, one reason, beyond Holbein's acknowledged liking for the subject, for the "Simulachres" being considered his; that book was often bound and sold with another "Historiarum Veteris Testamenti Icones" of which the cuts were designed by Holbein. In this collection of Biblical cuts, the first four of the Dance of Death were used, as they appropriately might be.

As there is little foundation for supposing that Holbein designed the "Simulachres," so there is as little for presuming that he engraved them. There is at Basil one single sheet of alphabetical cuts with a Death Dance, which are similar in style to those of the unknown dead artist above-mentioned; the sheet bears the monogram H L, and the words, in German, "Hans Lutzelburger, Block-cutter, in Basel." Here we have probably the name of the engraver of the "Simulachres." Holbein may have designed some of the additional cuts, and perhaps this alphabet.

Among the various imitations of the cuts may be mentioned a work by Aldegraver, 1541, which is chiefly noteworthy for its difference from its model. Generally the object was to copy as closely as possible.

The Basil Dance was copied in copper-plate in 1621, by Merian.

In 1654 was produced at Antwerp a Dance of Death called "Death Unmasked." These on the title-page are said to be Holbein's cuts, yet, though there are, in reality, fifteen original cuts from the "Simulachres" and three others, they are marked with the initials A P, being those of a celebrated, though now unknown, artist, who worked in the Low Countries in the 16th century. Other cuts so marked appear in some of the later editions

of "Simulachres," when published under the title of "Imagines Mortis."

In 1780, an artist at Basil, Cretien de Mechel, commenced the publication of a series of engravings of Holbein's works, commencing with forty-five engravings of the Dance of Death. These are stated by Mr. Coxe to be from a set in Indian ink by Holbein, and, moreover, the set from which Wenceslaus Hollar prepared his engravings of the Dance, and linked his own name with it in a degree only secondary to Hans Holbein.

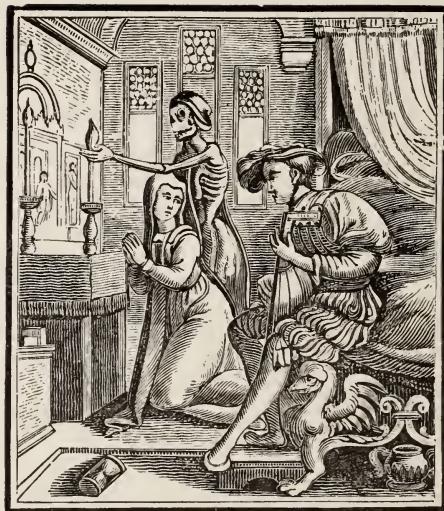
The opinion that Hollar copied what we may call the Mechel set seems to be unsupportable, for, as one of his editors has remarked, as his engravings now remain "they are not correct copies of any existing model," and (being Hollar) we cannot suppose him erroneous in this respect.

It may be that he copied the Whitehall frescoes, or some original drawings by Holbein, which have not survived; as Hollar's plates, Mechel's prints, and the cuts of the "Imagines Mortis," of 1555, contain the same variations from the editions of 1538 and 1542.

Hollar was born in 1607. His Dance of Death was first published in 1651, though apparently prepared some years earlier. His engravings of the Dance bear the initials HB i. (Holbein *invent.*?). One edition of thirty plates, with descriptions in English and French, have the plates in brown ink, and are colored.*

Probably few subjects have excited more conjecture, or given rise to more mistakes, than the Dance of Death. This cannot be surprising when the enquirer has to look through centuries to see his subject, but, though in the present age means of identification are not so slight, error seems to have pursued the subject to our

* The copy I have seen of this is in the possession of Mr. Joseph Temple, of Hull, to whom, it may here be mentioned, I have obligation in the matter of the blocks.



THE CANONESS.

Here we have a satirical glimpse into the devotion of a fair recluse; but good or bad, praying or playing, Death comes to put out the candles at last.



THE SOLDIER.

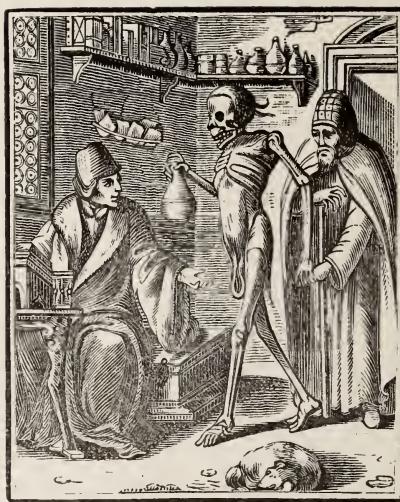
Strong and brave the soldier, but his two-handed sword avails not before
Death's dart, and Death's drum summons many to their last muster on the
battle-field.

own day. In 1825, W. Carlton Wright published a series of fifty-two engravings of a Dance of Death, and here occurs an unpardonable blunder. The title-page sets forth the work as "The Dance of Death of the celebrated Hans Holbein, in a series of fifty-two Engravings on Wood by Mr. Bewick : with letter-press illustrations." The excellent letter-press, however, is copied wholesale from an edition of Hollar announcing that "the plates, which appear to have been but little used, have been till lately preserved in a noble family, and impressions from them are once more presented to the public, without the slightest alteration, while a foot-note explains that "in the present edition, however, it was found necessary that the plates should be retouched, etc.," whereas the "plates" are "blocks" in "Bewick's" best manner. One of the most notable minor instances of this literary slovenliness appears at the outset, in the letter-press describing the "Mortalium Nobilitas," (a mock heraldic blazonment of a death's head upon a shield, *et cetera*). There are two supporters of the shield, concerning which the letter-press runs: "the two figures are probably intended for supporters, and represent the dress of the Swiss nobility of the sixteenth century." If so, that nobility must have realized Sidney Smith's desire—of being attired but in his bones—for "Mr. Bewick's" cuts are skeletons entirely unattired !

This scarcely finishes the account of errors in connection with this publication. The cuts for the most part previously appeared in Wright's magazine, the *Portfolio*, 1824, (and on the *Portfolio*'s thin soft paper the cuts appear to great advantage). In that magazine it is announced, on the 7th of August, that now were to be presented certain beautiful engravings "by the first Wood Engraver that ever this Country produced—BEWICK," and later on allusion is made to "the celebrated Bewick." Now these

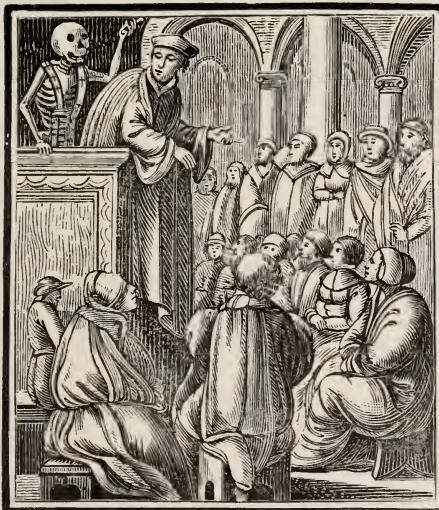
cuts were by John Bewick, the brother of "the celebrated" Thomas Bewick. These, distinctly better than much of the acknowledged work of the elder brother, were engraved about 1787, and published in 1789, under the title of "Emblems of Mortality," and according to Mr. Austin Dobson, were copied from the Latin "Imagines Mortis," of 1547. They were published by T. Hodgson, Clerkenwell, in 1789, and apparently simultaneously by William Charnley, Newcastle. In the latter work the cuts are announced as being engraved by Thomas and John Bewick, but in their correspondence on the subject, Thomas decidedly does not lead us to infer that he ever touched them. Mr. Wright declares, in connection with these cuts, that "expense is an object which is never regarded in supporting the character of the *Portfolio*." If the expense was serious to him, we have here an illustration of the manner in which artists' work is too commonly rewarded—John Bewick received *six shillings* each for these beautiful cuts; his brother wrote to tell him they were worth double, and probably in the year 1887 they could not, for drawing and engraving, be produced for less than five times the amount. According to Hugo they were destroyed by fire shortly after the publication of 1825.

Our regard for the Dance of Death is, now-a-days, chiefly biblio-archæological, and there is no very modern attempt to revive its ghastly charms; certainly on the Continent the abounding Dances receive periodical refurbishings, from a proper appreciation of their interest, while all our modern books dealing with the subject are issued on the pretext of reproduction of literary or artistic curiosities. There is one exception to this in Dagley's "Death's Doings," which, though precisely similar in design to many of the older works, abandons the idea and name of a pro-



THE PHYSICIAN.

Death leads to the Physician a sick man. Is it to finish his own work, or has the doctor need to remember the injunction, "Physician heal thyself?"



THE PREACHER.

Eloquent the Preacher may be, yet the human bone held aloft by Death preaches at a glance all the lessons of the "Dance of Death;" this interior is evidently that of a Reformed Church; other series are more Romish in character.

cession or dance, and allows the "Doings" to go forth on their merits. These merits are less abundant than the feebleesses of the work, though it is interesting as a distinct accentuation of the decadence of design in the particular subject.

The blocks illustrating this work are a series found in a northern printing office many years ago. They seem to be of considerable age, and are somewhat close copies of Holbein's designs so far as they go, but in which of the hundred editions (apparently one of the Latin editions) they originally appeared, has not to the present been ascertained.

Holbein, 1495—1554.
Hollar, 1607—1677.
J. Bewick, 1750—1795.

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